Numbness

—"Can you hear the voice say now? Go home and back to sleep

And count the black sheep."

The guilt was the price of the mask.

The mask didn't just hide him from the world; it hid him from himself—the armor not just protecting the vulnerable interior but concealing it so completely that Est sometimes forgot the interior was there, sometimes believed that the surface was all there was, that the Prince and the product were the only versions of himself that existed.

But the question was still there. Who?

The question that had been sitting in his chest since the morning after—the morning when he'd woken alone, when the sheets had been twisted and the pillow had been dented by a head that was no longer there, when his body had still been vibrating with the afterimage of touch.

The question that had survived everything—the cologne, the factory reset, the internet's commentary, the word robot repeated until it stopped being an insult and started being a diagnosis he half-believed, the doubt that crept in during the quiet moments and whispered maybe they're right, maybe you are empty, maybe the boy was the only good thing that happened to you and you don't even remember his face.

The question that was not about curiosity but about need. About the urgent need to find the person who had touched him with reverence and asked before touching and seen the underneath—the real Est, the person beneath the turtleneck and the headphones and the hundred perfumes arranged by mood—and had not looked away.

He could ask Lego.

The thought arrived with the weight of something both possible and terrible. Lego would probably tell him. Lego, who was open and unguarded and who trusted people because trusting was his default setting, who wore his heart not on his sleeve but on his entire body, who communicated through touch and brightness and the specific, impossible-to-fake warmth of a person who had never learned to be cold—Lego would answer the question without suspecting the motivation behind it.

And the motivation was—mixed.

That was the truth. The truth Est was trying to hold honestly, trying not to hide from himself the way he hid from everyone else. The truth was that the calculation and the genuine desire coexisted, the way they always coexisted in Est, the way the

mask and the face coexisted, the way the armor and the vulnerability occupied the same body, the same breath, the same moment.

He wanted to find the boy. He wanted to use Lego to find the boy. Both things were true. Both things were him. And both things made him feel sick.

He approached anyway.

"Hey," Est said.

Lego looked up from his phone. The enormous eyes—natural-colored today, no contacts, the brown that was warm and deep and carried flecks of gold when the light hit them right—found Est's face, and the transformation was immediate.

The smile arrived—The one that said: I'm happy to see you. Specifically you. Not your follower count or your campaign metrics or your perfect jaw but you, the person, the Est underneath the product.

"P'Est!" Lego's voice was bright—the musical quality that made his name sound like a greeting and a celebration simultaneously. "Good afternoon!" He set his phone face-down on the sofa beside him—the gesture mirroring Est's own habit. "Are you here for work?" Lego asked.

"Contract signing," Est said. He sat down on the opposite sofa—not beside Lego, but across from him, the distance maintained. The distance was appropriate. Professional. But Est knew the real reason for the distance: the closeness would have made the guilt worse. The proximity would have sharpened the calculation, would have made the using more real, more present, more impossible to ignore. "You?" Est asked.

"Contract signing sounds fancy," Lego said, his feet tucking under him on the sofa. "I just came for a meeting. Radio collaboration. They want me to talk about aerial performance on a morning show."

"That sounds good."

"It sounds terrifying." Lego's fingers found the rabbit plushie on his bag, touching it absently, the nervous gesture. "I don't know how to talk about aerial work to people who've never done it. It's like explaining color to someone who can't see."

"You could demonstrate."

"On morning radio?"

"Good point."

Lego laughed—the bright, musical sound that filled the cafeteria's corporate space and made it warmer, made the fluorescent lights seem less harsh, made the marble

floors seem less cold.

They talked. Or rather—Lego talked. Est listened.

Lego talked about the radio show. About the questions they wanted to ask. About how the producer had called aerial silks "those ribbon things" and Lego had spent ten minutes explaining that they were not ribbons but professionally rated nylon tricot that could hold four hundred pounds and that calling them ribbons was like calling a parachute "a big bedsheet." He talked with his hands—the long nails moving through the air, drawing shapes.

"I always have trouble explaining the fear," Lego said. His voice had shifted—from bright to thoughtful, the register lowering, the confession arriving. "People ask, 'Aren't you scared?' And I want to say, 'Of course I'm scared. The fear is the point. If I wasn't scared, it wouldn't mean anything.' But that sounds weird when you say it out loud."

"It doesn't sound weird to me," Est said, The sentence arrived before the filter could catch it. "The fear is—" Est searched for the right words, the words that would be true without being too much, that would connect without revealing. "The fear is what makes it honest. Anyone can do something that doesn't scare them. The bravery is doing the thing that does."

Lego was quiet for a moment. His expression shifted—the brightness softening into something more thoughtful, the face of a person who had heard something that mattered.

"You understand," Lego said. His voice was soft—not the performance soft. "Most people don't."

"I understand some things."

"What are you scared of?"

The question was—direct. Unexpected. The kind of question that Lego asked because Lego asked things, because Lego's curiosity was not strategic but genuine, because Lego wanted to know people rather than use them, because knowing was how Lego loved.

Est thought about it. Thought about the honest answer and the safe answer and the gap between them—the gap that was the space where Est lived, the territory between truth and performance.

"Being seen," he said finally. The words came slowly, carefully, each one chosen. "Really seen. Not the surface—anyone can see the surface. The cameras see the surface. The internet sees the surface. But being seen underneath. And being found —" He paused. The next word was heavy. "—lacking."

Lego nodded slowly. "I used to be scared of that too," Lego said.

"Used to be?"

"Now I'm more scared of being invisible." Lego's fingers found the rabbit plushie again, the touch automatic, the comfort-seeking gesture. "Of being in a room full of people and having none of them actually see me. Of performing the brightness so well that everyone thinks the brightness is all there is." A pause. "The fear changed," Lego said quietly. "I don't know if that's progress or just—different."

"Maybe both," Est said.

"Maybe." Lego smiled again. "You're easy to talk to, P'Est," Lego said. "That surprises me."

"Why?"

"Because you're—" Lego gestured vaguely at Est's entire being, the gesture encompassing the jaw and the posture and the expensive shirt and the whole carefully constructed exterior. "You're the Prince. The internet's Prince. I expected you to be—I don't know. More guarded. More surface."

"I am guarded," Est said. The honesty continuing, the filter still not catching up. "I'm very guarded. I'm just—trying not to be. Today."

Est listened. He asked questions—the right questions, the questions that a person asked when they were genuinely interested rather than strategically gathering information.

And he was genuinely interested. That was the complicated part. The interest was real. Lego was interesting—not in the shallow, surface way that the internet found him interesting (the aesthetic, the followers, the viral videos) but in the deep way that people were interesting when you actually listened to them, when you asked them about their fears and their failures and the things they were trying to figure out. But underneath the genuine interest, the calculation was running. The background process. The mental tab that wouldn't close, that kept refreshing, that kept scanning for the opening, the opportunity, the strategic moment when he could ask about the party, about who was there, about who went home with whom.

Ask about the party.

Ask about who was there.

Ask who went home with whom.

The guilt sharpened. He had come to this conversation with a purpose—with an ulterior motive, with the strategic intention of using Lego's trust to extract information. And Lego was sitting here, trusting him, sharing fears, saying you're

easy to talk to like it was a compliment, like Est had earned it, like Est was a person worth trusting rather than a person actively calculating how to exploit that trust. The guilt was a knife. A warm knife.

Ask.

He didn't ask. Not yet. The timing wasn't right. The asking would have been too sudden, too transparent, the shift from tell me about your radio interview to who did I sleep with at the warehouse too jarring, too obvious, the mask slipping, the calculation visible.

"The show on Saturday was amazing," Est said instead.

True. Not strategic—true. The genuine response, the honest reaction, the thing Est had felt watching Lego fall and catch himself in the red spotlight. Lego's face changed—the brightness returning, but softer now, warmer.

"You think so?" Lego's voice carried surprise and pleasure in equal measure. "I was so nervous. The new routine—the fabric work in the second section—I've only been training it for a month. There's a transition where I have to release both hands and catch a different wrap mid-drop, and if the timing is off by even half a second—" He made a gesture—hands opening, falling, the mime of catastrophe.

"It looked effortless," Est said.

"It looked effortless because I practiced it four hundred times." Lego's smile shifted—from bright to something more private, more proud. "That's the secret of aerials. The audience sees the beauty. The aerialist feels the burn."

"That sounds like modeling," Est said. The parallel arriving unbidden, the connection forming. "The audience sees the jaw. The model feels the—"

He paused. What did the model feel?

The hands adjusting his chin. The pedestal beneath his feet. The lights—hot, bright, the specific temperature of being looked at. The coldness of the studio. The emptiness of the performance. The six years of training himself not to feel anything because feeling would show and showing would be unprofessional and unprofessional was unacceptable.

"The emptiness," Est said quietly.

The word surprised him. The word had arrived before the filter caught it, before the mask could intervene, before the Prince could edit the person.

"P'Est," Lego said. His voice was different now—softer, gentler. "You don't have to be empty here. You know that, right?" Lego leaned forward slightly, his elbows on his knees, his face earnest. "You can be—whatever you are. Full. Messy. Confused.

Angry. Happy. Real. We don't care about the jaw, P'Est. We care about—"

He gestured at Est—not at the exterior, not at the face or the clothes, but at the space where the chest was, where the heart lived, where the feelings lived when they were allowed to exist.

"—the person."

The sentence was a knife. A gentle knife, the blade warm, the cutting painless but deep, the incision precise, the wound clean. The guilt intensified. Because Lego was being kind—genuinely, unconditionally—and Est was sitting across from him with a hidden agenda, using the kindness as a pathway to information, treating the openness as a vulnerability to exploit.

He felt sick.

"Hey, you're both here." Hong's voice cut through the moment like a guitar riff through silence—sharp, recognizable, unmistakable.

Hong appeared at the edge of the sofa area—materializing the way Hong always materialized, as if he'd been there the entire time and had simply chosen this moment to become visible.

Today he was—different. Groomed. The word was unexpected for Hong, whose usual aesthetic was deliberately ungroomed, the dishevelment a statement, the mess a choice, the gray hair and the eyeliner and the distressed leather all communicating I do not care what you think with the volume turned to maximum. But today: a white shirt. Clean. Pressed. The fabric crisp, the collar sitting properly, the shirt the kind that required ironing or professional laundering, the kind that said I made an effort.

A denim jacket over it—The combination of the clean shirt and the lived-in jacket was—Hong. Recognizable but unfamiliar. The same person in a different register.

He sat down on the same sofa as Lego—not beside him but on him, practically, the legs touching, the bodies arranged with the casual, unconscious, we-do-this-all-the-time proximity of people who were comfortable in each other's space, who didn't need to negotiate the touching because the touching was assumed, was how they existed together. Lego greeted him with a half-hug—the body leaning sideways, the cheek pressing against Hong's cheek.

"I was waiting for you," Lego said, settling back into his spot, his body angled toward Hong now, the triangle of attention including Est but centered on Hong.

"Sorry," Hong said. His voice was—apologetic? The word didn't quite fit Hong, whose default mode was unapologetic. But the tone was there. Small. Real. "P'Kwan wanted to talk. She always wants to talk. And I had a fitting upstairs."

"What did they give you?" Lego asked.

"A blazer." Hong's face did something—a micro-expression, a tightening around the eyes that was either pain or rage or the specific combination of both that Hong deployed when the industry demanded he be something he wasn't. "I'm considering burning it."

"Don't burn it," Lego said, his hand finding Hong's arm, the touch light, grounding. "Blazers are expensive."

"That's why burning it would be satisfying."

"P'Hong."

"Fine. I won't burn it. I'll just—glare at it. Aggressively. Until it understands that it's not welcome."

Hong looked at Est then—the eyes finding him across the small table, the assessment happening in the space of a blink. The same look from the rooftop photo night, but quicker now, more casual, less intense. The decision had already been made. This was confirmation rather than investigation.

"P'Est," Hong said, his voice shifting to something warmer, less flat. "What are you doing here?"

"Contract signing," Est said.

"Adidas?"

"Yes."

"Good." Hong's mouth curved—not quite a smile, but the foundation of one, the beginning. "That means we'll be working together."

"Thursday. The shoot."

"I know. Dana sent me seventeen emails about it. Seventeen. I counted." Hong leaned back on the sofa, his arm going automatically to the back of it, behind Lego's shoulders without quite touching, the gesture both protective and casual. "Try not to outshine me too much."

"I'll do my best," Est said.

"Your best is very good. That's the problem."

Lego laughed—the bright, musical laugh that filled the cafeteria's corporate space and made the marble floors and glass walls seem less cold, less institutional, less like a machine designed to consume people and more like a place where people actually existed.

"You two are going to be insufferable during the shoot," Lego said, his eyes moving

between them, the brightness fully restored now, the worry from earlier—the worry about the radio interview, about explaining aerials to people who didn't understand—completely gone. "I can already tell."

"We're professionals," Hong said, his voice carrying the specific, deadpan delivery that made it impossible to tell whether he was joking or serious or both. "We'll be professionally insufferable."

"That's worse."

"Probably."

They talked. The conversation moved the way conversations in this group always moved—freely, without agenda, the topics arriving and departing like passengers at a bus stop, each one boarding for a few minutes, being acknowledged, and then making way for the next.

Lego talked about the radio interview. Hong talked about the blazer and P'Kwan and the specific, ongoing war between his aesthetic preferences and the agency's commercial requirements. Est talked less—listening more, absorbing, the collector's instinct engaged but the calculation temporarily suspended, the strategic part of his brain taking a break while the person part watched and learned and tried to understand how this worked, how people did this, how they sat together and talked about nothing important and made the nothing feel like everything.

"Speaking of professional things," Hong said, looking at Est with the specific, casual directness that was Hong's way of introducing topics that actually mattered while pretending they didn't, "we're going to Nut's studio after this. Are you interested in checking it out?"

"If you have time now, of course," Hong added. "No pressure. It's just—Nut's place is close. And he makes good coffee. And the studio is—" Hong paused, searching. "—worth seeing. If you're into that kind of thing."

Est's brain reacted.

Nut's studio.

The place where tattoos were made.

The unfinished tattoo.

The botanical skeleton that his fingers had traced in the dark.

The half-completed design that existed on the back of a person whose face he couldn't remember and whose touch he couldn't forget.

The opportunity was here—not extracted, not manipulated, not obtained through strategic use of Lego's trust, but offered. Freely. Generously. By Hong, who was inviting him not because Est had calculated his way into the invitation but because Hong apparently wanted him there.

Come see our space. Come be in our world. Come closer.

And Est wanted to go.

Genuinely.

He wanted to go because Hong was inviting him. Because Lego was smiling. Because the studio was where their life happened—the real life, the non-commercial life, the space where they existed as people rather than products—and they were opening the door and asking him to walk through it. The way Hong had opened the service door at the rooftop party. The way every door in Est's new life was being opened by people, because inclusion was their default, because warmth was how they moved through the world.

"Okay," Est said.

The word was simple. The word was the same word he had been saying since the rooftop—okay, I'll come, I'll be there, yes—the accumulating yeses of a person who was learning, one door at a time, one invitation at a time, to walk through rather than past. Lego beamed. The full-face beam, the nuclear brightness, the smile that could power a city block.

He gathered his things—the Miu Miu bag with its rabbit plushie charm, the phone that he tucked into the bag's interior pocket, the remnants of his iced water that he carried to the cafeteria's trash bin, the small rituals of departure performed with the same attention that he gave to everything.

Hong stood. He offered a hand to Lego—the gesture automatic, unconscious. Lego took the hand. He stood. The platform sneakers added height but not enough—he was still shorter, still looking up at Hong.

They walked toward the exit—Hong in front, the stride long and confident, the body language of a person who navigated the corporate building not as an employee but as a visitor who had decided that the building existed for his convenience rather than the other way around.

And Est walked with them.

And the guilt walked with him.

Because he was going to Nut's studio for two reasons, and one of them was real and one of them was calculated, and the two reasons occupied the same space inside him the way the mask and the face occupied the same head, and he could not

separate them, could not remove the calculation from the genuine desire, could not walk through the door as only one version of himself. He was going because he wanted to be with them. He was going because he wanted to find the boy. Both things were true. Both things were him.

They took a taxi to Nut's studio.

The three of them in the back seat—Lego in the middle, Hong by the left window, Est by the right. The positioning was—organic. Not planned. Hong looked out the window, his face turned toward the city, watching Bangkok scroll past—the buildings, the traffic, the street vendors, the temples and the cranes and the specific, chaotic, beautiful mess that was the city at two in the afternoon.

The city scrolled past—the buildings, the traffic, the Valentine's decorations still lingering even though the holiday had passed, the red and pink hearts fading as the retailers moved on to the next commercial celebration, the next excuse to decorate and sell and perform affection at maximum volume.

Lego talked.

About a new nail design he was trying—miniature dried flowers embedded in gel, the nails as tiny terrariums, the beauty carried on fingertips. The conversation flowed with the continuous, multi-topic, no-pause energy that was Lego's verbal signature, the stream-of-consciousness that other people might have found exhausting but that Est was beginning to recognize as Lego, as the way Lego's brain worked, the way the thoughts arrived and were spoken without the filter that most people used, without the gap between thinking and saying. And Est sat beside the window, watching the city move, feeling the guilt and the hope coexist in his chest the way the mask and the face coexisted on his head.

The question waited. Patient now. Not urgent. Not demanding. Just—there. In his chest. In the back seat of a taxi. In the space between the genuine desire to be with these people and the calculated desire to use them.

Who?

He was getting closer. The blur was resolving—not into a face yet, not into features, but into a shape, into a possibility that was narrowing, into a person who was somewhere in this city, who was part of this group, who carried the same memory in a different body.

The fragmented memory—hands on his face, fingers in his hair, the voice asking is everything alright?, the concern that was real, the touch that asked permission, the forehead kiss that had felt like a blessing—was becoming something sharper, something more defined.

The person inside the blur had earth-toned clothes. Careful hands. An unfinished

tattoo on their back—a botanical design, skeleton leaves, the lines present and the lines absent, the story being written on skin that was warm beneath his fingers. And that person was somewhere in this city. In this group. In this life that Est was building one door at a time, one invitation at a time, one yes at a time.

When Est climbed out of the taxi behind Hong and Lego, the building was not what he'd imagined.

He'd expected something like The Lost Boys—the old vampire movie he'd watched once in Maryland, the underground lair, the hidden space in an abandoned place, the aesthetic of rebellion and secrecy. He'd imagined Nut's studio the way the internet might have imagined it: dark, edgy.

The reality was—ordinary.

The building was central. Not hidden. Not far from the agency. The neighborhood was lived-in rather than designed—the buildings neither gleaming-new nor picturesque-old, just there, the architecture functional, the street populated with the specific, mixed-use, people-actually-live-here quality of a Bangkok block that had survived gentrification by being too useful to demolish, too ordinary to destroy.

Five stories. Concrete. Functional balconies. No elevator—tall staircases visible through the building's open entrance, the kind of stairs that were a fact of life rather than a feature.

"No elevator?" Est asked as they approached the entrance, his eyes tracking upward, counting floors, doing the mental math of how many flights would be required to reach the top.

"Nut's on the first floor," Hong said, pushing through the entrance, the door already open because doors in buildings like this were always open during the day, the security minimal, the trust baseline. "The stairs are for the neighbors."

"And for leg day," Lego added, his voice cheerful. "P'Nut says the stairs are better than the gym."

"P'Nut has many opinions about physical fitness," Hong said. "Most of them involve unnecessary suffering."

Next door: a chain coffee shop. The green-and-white logo glowing through the window even in daylight, the baristas visible inside, the menu board and the pastry case and the specific, corporate, same-everywhere aesthetic that existed on every block in every city in the world, the global franchise that had colonized local space and made it identical to every other space.

The coffee shop was so ordinary, so aggressively normal, so completely lacking in

the edgy-underground-artist aesthetic that its proximity to a tattoo studio felt almost like a joke, like a punchline about gentrification and commerce and the way even rebellion had to exist next to corporate coffee because rent was expensive and coffee shops paid rent on time.

"You look disappointed," Hong said, watching Est assess the building, reading the micro-expressions that Est thought he'd been hiding.

"I expected something more—" Est paused, searching for the diplomatic word.

"Gothic? Underground? Skulls on the door? A neon sign that says 'Tattoos and Suffering'?"

"Something like that."

"Nut's a tattoo artist, not a vampire," Hong said, his mouth curving into something that was almost a smile. "He lives next to a Starbucks and owns a Moomin collection. Adjust your expectations."

They climbed to the first floor—not a climb, really, just a few steps.

The door was open.

Nut greeted them at the threshold—the serious face transforming when he saw who was arriving, the smile appearing slowly but completely. The smell hit Est first, The smell of disinfectant. And underneath that, warmer: sandalwood incense.

Nut was wearing a gray t-shirt and shorts—casual, comfortable. Bare feet on the polished concrete floor. The body relaxed but the attention sharp, the eyes taking in the three arrivals and prioritizing them in the space of a breath. He saw Lego first. Of course he did. The eyes found the bright thing, the small thing, the person who was already moving toward him with arms opening.

Nut's arms opened—the automatic gesture, the mirror reflex, the body responding to Lego's body without conscious thought because the responding was habit, was how they greeted each other, was the physical language they shared.

Lego stepped into the hug. Nut lifted him—Lego's platform sneakers leaving the ground entirely, the small body hoisted into the air with the effortless strength of a person who lifted weights and who used that strength not for display but for this, for the specific joy of lifting people he loved and making them laugh. The hug was energetic. Nut spun him once a full rotation, Lego's long hair flying outward, the physics of centrifugal force applied to a person who spent his life defying physics.

"Lego," Nut said, and the name was both greeting and affection, the single word carrying warmth. He set Lego down. Gently.

Lego laughed. "P'Nut! You're going to break my back!"

"Your back is fine," Nut said, his hands still on Lego's shoulders, steadying him. "I've seen your back. I know exactly how much force it can handle. It bends in ways that shouldn't be legal."

"Aerial training. Different from being compressed by a giant."

"I'm not a giant. I'm average."

"Average for a giant," Lego corrected, grinning.

Hong walked past them—into the apartment, the movement casual, the ease of a person entering his own space, or a space so familiar it might as well be his own. The keys not needed. The invitation not required.

"Are we hugging, or are we drinking coffee?" Hong called from somewhere inside the apartment, his voice carrying the specific, flat amusement that meant he was enjoying the scene but would never admit to enjoying it. "I vote coffee."

"Both," Nut said. He turned to Est, his expression shifting—from the warmth of greeting Lego to the more measured, slightly more formal warmth of greeting someone new, someone being welcomed but not yet known.

He extended his hand. The handshake was firm. Warm. "Est," Nut said. "It's great that you're joining us."

"Thank you for having me," Est replied.

"Any friend of Hong's is welcome here." A pause. The mouth curved slightly. "Even if Hong's judgment is historically questionable."

"My judgment is excellent," Hong called from somewhere deeper in the apartment. "I judged that you needed better friends, and I provided them. You're welcome."

Nut shook his head, but he was smiling. He stepped aside, gesturing for Est to enter. "Come in. Ignore Hong. He thinks sarcasm is a personality trait."

"It's a coping mechanism," Hong said, appearing in the doorway that separated the entry from the main living space, a coffee cup already in his hand. "There's a difference."

The apartment was open-plan. Exposed brick on one wall—the brick not painted, not covered, just there, the red-orange clay showing its age and its texture. Metal beams crossing the ceiling—structural, load-bearing, the skeleton of the building visible, the architecture honest. Concrete floors that had been sealed and polished but not hidden, the industrial material treated with respect rather than shame.

The space was large. Two levels. The ground floor—where they were now and

above, accessible by a metal staircase, a mezzanine. From below, Est could see the edge of the railing and the suggestion of a private space: the bedroom, presumably, the place where Nut slept, where the public gave way to the personal.

Downstairs was the life.

The kitchen—clean, organized, the counters spotless, the kind of clean that suggested either a person who was naturally tidy or a person who had professional training in cleanliness. A commercial-grade espresso machine sat on the counter, gleaming, the machine so serious and expensive that it looked like it belonged in a café rather than a home.

The dining area—small, functional, a simple wooden table with four chairs, the table showing evidence of recent use: a laptop, some papers, a coffee cup with the residue of espresso at the bottom.

The sofa—large, gray, deep, the kind of sofa that was designed for sitting and staying rather than for looking good in photographs. Lego had already claimed it, his body arranging itself in one corner with the boneless, gravity-optional ease that made Est wonder, not for the first time, whether aerialists were actually subject to the same physical laws as normal humans or whether they'd negotiated a separate treaty with physics.

And at the back of the space—separated from the living area by an open doorway and a shift in flooring from polished concrete to sealed concrete—the studio. The tattoo studio occupied the rear third of the apartment. Professional. Serious. The space where art happened and where the art was permanent, where the mistakes couldn't be undone, where precision was not a preference but a requirement.

The hydraulic chair sat in the center. Cabinets and shelves lined the walls, filled with supplies Est didn't fully recognize but could identify by category: ink bottles in rows, organized by color, the spectrum visible. Needle cartridges in sealed packages—sterile, single-use, the disposable tools of a permanent trade. Bottles of green soap. Rolls of plastic wrap. Paper towels. A sterilization unit in the corner, humming quietly, the machine that kept everything clean, that prevented infection, that made the art safe.

The anatomical sketches hung on the walls—framed, matted, the drawings detailed and beautiful. Not the simplified, cartoonish anatomy of textbooks, but real studies: muscles layered over bones, tendons connecting, the body rendered with the precision of a person who understood that skin was a surface but underneath was structure, was architecture, was the framework that made everything else possible.

The ceiling was high. The windows were large and tall, facing the street, the afternoon light pouring in through sheer curtains that diffused it, that made it soft, that turned the clinical space into something warmer.

A pull-up bar was installed in the doorway between the living area and the studio—the kind that braced against the frame, that required no drilling, that was always present. An invitation. A challenge. The bar showed signs of use—the metal slightly worn where hands gripped, the wear pattern of someone who used it daily, who pulled their body weight up and down until the pulling was automatic, was meditation, was how the body processed thought.

And above—

Est looked up.

The ceiling held its secret. Steel structures. Circus rigging. The rigging was subtle—integrated into the ceiling's existing beams. Now that Est knew—thanks to Lego's performance on Saturday, thanks to the red silks and the falls and the catches—the rigging was obvious. But an average visitor would see the steel and assume it was structural, part of the building's original design, load-bearing beams doing load-bearing work rather than person-bearing work.

"You have rigging," Est said, his eyes still on the ceiling, tracing the steel, following the attachment points.

Nut followed his gaze upward. "For Lego. He practices here sometimes."

"Sometimes," Lego said from the sofa, his voice carrying the specific tone of a person correcting an understatement. "When P'Nut doesn't worry too much."

"I worry an appropriate amount," Nut said.

"P'Nut, you're being overprotective right now."

"I'm being appropriately protective. There's a difference."

Hong returned from upstairs—Est hadn't even noticed him leave, but now he was descending with something in his hands: a portable speaker, small, expensive-looking.

"Are we still arguing about the rigging?" Hong said, reaching the ground floor, setting the speaker on the coffee table. "Because this argument is older than I am."

"You're twenty-two," Lego said. "The rigging has only been here for a year."

"Feels longer. The argument feels eternal."

"Coffee?" Nut asked, already moving toward the kitchen, the question rhetorical because Nut was already making coffee, the espresso machine already humming to life, the professional-grade equipment doing professional-grade work.

"I have good beans," Nut continued, pulling out a bag from a cabinet, the bag labeled with a roaster's name Est didn't recognize. "The espresso machine is—"

"Excessive." Hong supplied.

"Professional-grade," Nut corrected.

"Excessively professional-grade."

"I like good coffee. That's not excessive. That's having standards."

Est accepted a cup when Nut offered it. The coffee was excellent—the kind of excellent that came from expensive equipment and expensive beans and someone who knew how to use both, the holy trinity of coffee perfection, the combination that made Est's own espresso machine—which he'd thought was quite good—seem merely adequate. Lego declined coffee, accepting instead a glass of iced water. No ice-eating today, Est noticed. The water sat on the coffee table, sweating condensation onto a coaster.

They settled in the living area—Est on one end of the large gray sofa, Hong sprawled across the middle in a posture that suggested either extreme comfort or extreme exhaustion or both, Lego curled in what appeared to be his designated spot: a corner with a view of both the door and the windows, the positioning of someone who liked to see everything without being the center of attention.

Nut sat in a chair across from them— a regular chair, comfortable, worn. His posture was relaxed but alert, the posture of a host who was comfortable but still paying attention.

Music played from the speaker Hong had brought down—a band Est didn't recognize, the song in English, the melody warm and slightly melancholic, the kind of music that filled a room without demanding attention, that existed as atmosphere rather than as event.

"So," Lego said, his iced water in his hand, his legs tucked under him. "P'Est. What do you think of P'Nut's place?"

"It's not what I expected," Est admitted.

"What did you expect?" Nut asked, his coffee cup resting on his knee, the steam rising.

"Something darker. More—" Est searched for the word. "—hidden."

"The studio lights are specific. I need direct, bright light for the tattooing. But the living space—" He gestured at the tall windows, at the afternoon light pouring through the sheer curtains. "I need natural light. Tattooing is precision work. If my eyes are strained from living in a cave, my lines suffer."

"His lines never suffer," Lego said loyally.

"I'm being accurate."

"You're being humble."

They talked. The conversation moved the way conversations moved in this group—freely, the natural drift of people who were comfortable together. Nut asked Est about the Adidas campaign. About the shoot on Thursday. About how he was feeling about working with Hong.

"How are you feeling about it?" Nut asked.

Est considered the question. How was he feeling? The honest answer was: complicated. The professional answer was: prepared. The answer he gave was somewhere in between.

"Ready, I think," Est said. "It's different, working with someone I actually know. Usually, the other models are strangers. We perform chemistry for the camera and then never see each other again. This feels like it might actually be—"

He paused. Searching for the word. The right word. The word that was honest without being too much.

"Friendship?" Lego suggested, his eyes bright, his voice hopeful.

"Something." Est said.

Hong laughed—the short, sharp burst that was becoming familiar, that Est was learning to read as affection rather than mockery.

"He's very careful with words, our Est," Hong said. "Won't commit to friendship. Might be something. Very diplomatic."

"I'm being honest," Est said.

"Honesty and diplomacy can coexist. You're proof."

Lego talked about his work—the freelance modeling that Est hadn't known about, though it made sense now, made perfect sense given the professional photos on Lego's social media.

"Wait," Est said. "You model?"

"Freelance," Lego said. "Mostly alternative brands. LGBT+ support campaigns. The kind that want someone who looks like—" He gestured at himself: the piercings, the long nails, the aesthetic that was simultaneously soft and sharp, sweet and subversive. "—this."

"There's a market for 'this'?" Est asked, and immediately regretted the phrasing, the question sounding more skeptical than he'd intended. But Lego didn't seem offended. His smile widened.

"P'Est," Lego said, his voice carrying the tone of a person explaining something obvious to someone intelligent who had somehow missed it. "There's a market for everything. The whole world is markets. The trick is finding the people who want what you already are instead of trying to become what everyone else wants."

"He's right," Hong said. "I spent two years trying to look like other models before I realized that the thing that made me unemployable—the gray hair, the eyeliner, the attitude—was also the thing that made me interesting. The thing that P'Kwan calls 'difficult' and that I call 'having a personality.'"

"The difficult and the interesting are often the same thing." Nut observed.

"That's what I tell P'Kwan," Hong said. "She disagrees, Loudly."

Then Lego surprised them.

"Speaking of the Adidas campaign," Lego said, his voice casual, his fingers playing with the condensation on his water glass, "I'm in the shoot too."

The table paused. Three pairs of eyes, six seconds of silence, the collective processing of information that had been delivered casually but that was, actually, significant.

"What?" Lego said, his eyes moving between them, his expression innocent. "Did I not mention that?"

"No," Hong said. "You did not mention that."

"Huh. I thought I did."

"You didn't."

"Well." Lego sipped his water. "I'm mentioning it now."

"You're in the same campaign as Est and me?" Hong said, sitting up slightly, the sprawl abandoning, attention engaged.

"And seven other people, yes," Lego said. "They want different bodies, different sports. Aerial acrobatics counts as a sport. I'm model number seven of ten."
"Swimmers, runners, someone who does parkour," Lego continued. "They wanted to show that Adidas works for everyone, not just traditional athletes. That performance isn't just one thing. That bodies are different and that's—" He searched for the word. "—good."

"That's very on brand for Lego," Hong said. "Being included in things. Representing.

You're very good at it."

"I'm good at being visible," Lego corrected. "The alternative bodies. The people who don't fit the usual mold. Someone has to be visible so other people know they can be visible too."

"You fit every mold," Nut said quietly. "You just reshape them first."

"Did you know this when I invited Est today?"

"I found out this morning," Lego said. "My agent called during the radio meeting. I was going to tell you, but then we got distracted by P'Nut's coffee and the conversation and—" He shrugged. "It's going to be fun. All of us in matching Adidas. P'Hong in sneakers instead of boots. P'Est without a turtleneck. Me in sportswear instead of lace. Nobody will recognize us."

"I'll recognize you," Nut said. The sentence was quiet. Certain.

"You'll recognize everyone," Hong said. "You have X-ray vision for bodies."

"It's not X-ray vision. It's professional observation."

"It's creepy, Nut."

The afternoon deepened. The light through the tall windows shifted, the white-gold of afternoon becoming amber, the sun descending, the day aging into evening, the color temperature of the world changing degree by degree.

"We should go to the roof," Hong said, standing, the sprawl abandoned entirely now. "Better light. Better view. Better air."

They went up to the roof. The journey was internal—a narrow staircase at the back of the building, accessible through a door in Nut's apartment, the stairs steep and slightly claustrophobic, the walls close, the climb requiring attention.

The rooftop, when they emerged, was raw.

Flat concrete. Unfinished. A few mismatched chairs—the kind that had been rescued from other contexts, from apartments and cafés and street corners, chairs that had been deemed disposable by their previous owners and had been claimed by whoever lived here, repurposed, given new life. No design. No intention beyond the basic provision of a surface from which the sky could be watched and the city could be seen.

The view was honest: the skyline in full, unobstructed, the temples and the cranes and the old buildings and the new buildings and the specific, chaotic, beautiful collision of past and future that was Bangkok's architectural signature.

The sky was beginning its transformation—the blue giving way to gold, the gold giving way to orange, the orange beginning its slow, inevitable drift toward pink and violet and the deep blue-black of evening.

Hong produced cigarettes—the pack appearing from his jacket pocket with the practiced, automatic motion of a person for whom smoking was habit and ritual and the small, rebellious pleasure that the industry frowned upon and that he performed anyway because the frowning was the point.

He offered one to Est. Est accepted.

The cigarettes were lit. The smoke rose—gray-white against the amber sky, the personal clouds joining the atmospheric haze.

Est took one. Lit it with the lighter Hong offered—a simple lighter, disposable, the kind you bought at convenience stores. The familiar comfort arrived: the nicotine, the warmth in his lungs, the ritual of inhalation and exhalation, the brief, chemical, morally neutral pleasure that he had been hiding for years and was now, on this rooftop, performing openly.

He turned toward Lego and Nut, who stood together near the edge of the roof, looking at the view.

"Either of you want one?" Est asked, offering the pack.

Lego shook his head, grinning—the smile too wide, too bright, the smile that was mischief and honesty combined. "I don't smoke nicotine." Lego said.

The emphasis was deliberate. Specific. The word nicotine doing work, creating a distinction, implying a category.

"Nicotine specifically." Est repeated, his mouth curving.

"Nicotine specifically." Lego confirmed, the grin widening.

"What do you smoke, then?"

"P'Est," Lego said, his voice carrying mock-seriousness, "some questions are better left unanswered. For legal reasons."

Hong laughed—the real laugh, the unguarded one, the one that was surprise and delight rather than sarcasm. "Lego's vices are artisanal," Hong said. "Very curated. Very intentional."

"P'Hong!"

"What? I'm being complimentary. Artisanal is a good word. It means you have taste."

Nut declined the cigarette offer with a simple wave—the gesture polite, final, the wave of a person who had made a decision about smoking years ago and was comfortable with that decision. "I don't smoke at all." Nut said.

"Very responsible." Est said.

"Someone has to be," Nut replied, his voice warm. "I'm surrounded by people who make questionable choices."

"That's unfair," Hong protested, smoke curling from his mouth as he spoke. "My choices are deliberately questionable. That's different from accidentally questionable."

"Is that supposed to be better?" Nut asked.

"It's supposed to be self-aware."

They settled into the chairs—the mismatched furniture creaking under their weight but holding, the chairs doing their job, the rescued objects proving their worth. Lego was on his phone again—scrolling through his feed, half-listening to the conversation, his attention divided between the people and the screen. Nut sat in a wicker chair that looked like it had been rescued from someone's grandmother's house, old, slightly worn, but sturdy, the wicker holding.

"There's a museum I want to visit," Nut said, addressing the group but looking at the sky, watching the colors deepen. "The one with the anatomy exhibition. The plastinated bodies."

"The what?" Hong said.

"Plastinated bodies," Nut repeated. "Real bodies, preserved. The water and fat replaced with plastic polymers. The structure visible—the muscles, the bones, the organs, everything that's usually hidden. You can see how the body works. How the pieces connect."

"That's horrifying." Hong said.

"It's educational."

"It's corpses, Nut. You want to look at corpses for fun."

"I want to look at anatomy for professional development. There's a difference."

"The difference is marketing."

"That's beautiful and terrifying," Est said, and he meant it.

"That's the body," Nut said, his voice quiet, thoughtful. "Beautiful and terrifying. Both at once. Always."

"You should take P'Will," Lego said without looking up from his phone. "He'd lose his mind. In a good way."

"I'll ask him," Nut said.

"Ask nicely," Lego added. "He's been weird."

"Weird how?" Nut's attention sharpened.

"Different quiet. Not his usual quiet."

Hong exhaled smoke. "Everyone holds things. That's not weird. That's being alive."

Lego was quiet for a moment. His thumb moved on the screen—the endless scroll, the infinite feed, the bottomless well of content that never ran dry because the supply was algorithmically infinite.Then—

"Oh."

The syllable was small. Soft. He looked up. His face had changed—the brightness dimmed, the concern visible, the brown eyes wide.

"What?" Hong asked, sitting forward, attention fully engaged now.

Lego turned the phone around. The screen faced outward—the image visible to the three people on the rooftop, the content shared.

A live stream. Split screen. Two faces.

On the left: Kai.

Est's chest locked. Kai's face on a screen. The beautiful face that the internet loved. The warm eyes. The smile that sold things. The face that had shared three years of Est's life and had ended them in a boutique hotel room with words that had felt like knives.

On the right: Milo.

Milo—the younger model, the one Est had protected.—the contacts made, the red envelope with enough cash to cover rent for three months while Milo found new representation, the if it happens once and you stay silent they won't stop conversation that Est had learned from bitter experience and had passed on as the only gift he could give.

And Milo was on a live stream. With Kai. And they were—Fighting.

The audio was playing from Lego's phone—tinny, compressed, but audible:

"—you manipulated everything!" Milo's voice—young, angry, determined, the voice

of a person who had decided to stop being quiet. "You let people call him a robot. A mannequin. You sat there in your streams and your interviews and let them say he has no feelings while you—"

Kai's face on the screen: the performance. The calculated vulnerability. The slight flinch, the eyes widening, the micro-expression that said I'm being attacked and that was designed to generate sympathy, to redirect the narrative, to make Kai the victim rather than the—

"Milo, I really don't think this is the place to—" Kai's voice, smooth, controlled, the voice that had convinced Est for three years that the problems in their relationship were Est's fault.

"Where is the place, Kai?" Milo's voice rising, the anger breaking through the fear. "Your other streams where you play the victim? The interviews where you hint that he abandoned you? When is the place, Kai? When do you stop lying?"

The clip cut. Someone's screen recording, captured mid-stream and shared, the moment already loose in the internet's bloodstream, already viral, already being clipped and commented on and distributed to the millions of people who consumed drama and produced opinions and who would, by tomorrow, have a hundred different interpretations of what they'd just seen.

Est's chest was still locked. The cigarette in his hand felt heavy—the smoke suddenly unwelcome, the comfort gone, replaced by the specific, physical nausea of a person whose private devastation had just become public entertainment.

"Shit," Hong said.

The word dropped into the amber air. Flat. Heavy. Lego lowered the phone. His eyes found Est's face—searching, careful, the brown eyes full of concern.

"The whole internet is seeing this," Lego said softly. "It's already been clipped. It's spreading."

"Good," Hong said. Est looked at him. Hong's face was—serious. The sarcasm gone. "Someone needed to say it." Hong continued.

"P'Hong—" Lego started.

"No. I mean it." Hong crushed his cigarette against the concrete rooftop—the cherry dying, the small orange light extinguished with force. "Someone needed to fight back. Someone needed to say out loud what everyone's been whispering. That the victim narrative is bullshit. That Est didn't abandon anyone."

"P'Est," Lego said, his voice quiet, careful, the voice he used when someone was hurting and he wanted to acknowledge the hurt without making it worse. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shown you. I wasn't thinking—"

"It's fine." Est said. His voice came out steady. Steadier than he felt. The performance activating automatically—the mask sliding into place, the armor engaging, the product responding even when the person was frozen.

"It's not fine." Lego said.

"It's—" Est looked at the sky. The amber was darkening. Stars should have been appearing, but Bangkok's light pollution held them prisoner, the city's glow too bright to allow the universe's light through. "It's something I'll have to deal with," Est said. "Eventually."

He knew what this meant. More attention. More commentary. More pressure to respond, to explain, to issue a statement, to perform his trauma for an audience that consumed pain and produced opinions and that believed public figures owed them explanations, owed them access, owed them the interior of their lives because the exterior had been monetized.

He hated it.

He hated that his private devastation—the boutique hotel room, the words that had felt like knives, the three years of trying to be enough for someone who had decided he was empty—had become public entertainment.

He hated that his ex, who had cheated, who had betrayed, who had demolished everything while maintaining his charming exterior and his warm public persona, was still playing the victim, was still collecting sympathy, was still manipulating the narrative to make Est the villain.

He hated that someday—probably soon, probably this week, probably the moment the clip reached critical mass and the think pieces started appearing and the discourse became unavoidable—he would have to explain himself to people who had no right to his explanation, who had not earned his story, who would consume it and produce takes and move on to the next scandal without ever understanding what it had cost him to speak.

But also— Also, Milo had done something brave. Milo had stood up. Milo had said out loud what Est had kept locked inside—the truth about Kai, about the manipulation, about the way Kai weaponized vulnerability and performed pain and used other people's empathy against them. And the saying had cost Milo something. The saying would cost Milo followers and opportunities and the specific, calculated goodwill of an industry that valued pleasant surfaces over honest depths. Milo would pay for defending Est.

But Milo had done it anyway.

"You don't have to deal with anything right now," Nut said. His voice was calm. Steady. "Not tonight. Not this week. You deal with it when you're ready."

"The internet doesn't wait for ready." Est said.

"The internet doesn't get to decide your schedule," Hong said. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his face serious. "The internet is a machine. You're a person. Persons go first."

"That's not how it works."

"That's how it should work. And in this apartment, on this rooftop, with these people—that's how it does work."

Est looked at him. At the gray hair against the darkening sky. At the flat expression that was not flat—that was, underneath the surface, underneath the sarcasm and the armor and the Black Sheep performance.

"Someday." Est said. His voice was quiet. "Someday I'll have to say what actually happened. Why we broke up. What he did. What I—" He paused. The next words were heavy. "What I couldn't be."

"Someday," Hong agreed. "Not today."

"But Milo—"

"Milo made his choice," Hong said. "He chose to defend you because you defended him first. That's how it works, Est. It's just—" He searched for the word. "—how love works."

Lego reached over. His hand found Est's forearm—the touch light.

"P'Est," Lego said. His voice was soft. "People who care about you don't wait for permission. They just—act. Milo didn't ask if he should defend you. He just did. Because when you love people, you defend them. That's the deal."

Est looked at the hand on his arm. At the black nails with their intricate designs. At the touch that asked nothing and offered everything.

He let the hand stay.

Seven o'clock. The sky was dark now—fully dark, the amber and orange and pink consumed by the blue-black of evening, the sun gone, the city taking over. The neon had activated. The streetlights had come on. From the rooftop, the view was—The traffic below moving like blood through arteries, red taillights flowing one direction, white headlights flowing the other, the circulatory system of a metropolis that never stopped.

Est stood.

"I should go." he said.

Hong pulled out his phone. His fingers moved across the screen—quick, practiced, the digital native's fluency. "I'm sending you the clip," Hong said. "The full version. The whole stream, not just the thirty-second viral piece."

"Why?" Est asked.

Hong looked up. His eyes found Est's.

"Because someday," Hong said, "when you're ready to say what happened, you might want to know what he said. What he risked for you." Hong's thumb moved. The file sent.

Est's phone buzzed in his pocket—the notification arriving, the data transferring, the evidence delivered.

"Someday you'll use it," Hong said. "Or you won't. That's your choice. But you should have it. You should have the option."

Est was quiet for a moment. Then:

"Okay."

"Okay." Hong echoed.

At the door of the apartment—back downstairs, the rooftop left behind—Lego hugged him. The arms wrapping around Est's middle, the face pressing against Est's chest.

"Come back soon, P'Est," Lego said into Est's chest.

"I will."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Lego pulled back. Looked up. The brown eyes—warm, honest, full of light even in the dim hallway.

"Good," Lego said. "Because we like having you here."

Nut walked Est to the staircase that led down to the street—the internal staircase, the one that residents used, the private path rather than the public one.

The walk was short—just a few steps from the door to the top of the stairs—but Nut's presence beside him was present.

"Thank you for having me." Est said, stopping at the top of the stairs, turning to face Nut.

"Come back anytime." Nut said.

The sentence was simple. The sentence was an open invitation. Nut extended his hand. The handshake was the same as before—firm, warm, intentional.

"You're welcome here." Nut said.

"I might take you up on that."

"I hope you do."

Nut's eyes held Est's. The serious face. The understanding in it.

And then—

"Whatever else you were looking for," Nut said quietly, "whatever question you brought through that door—the answer isn't going anywhere. The answer will be here when you're ready."

The sentence of a person who knew Est had come here looking for something and who was saying, kindly, gently: I know. And it's okay. And the answer will wait. Est looked at him. At the serious face that was not judging, not accusing, just—knowing.

"Thank you," Est said. His voice was quiet. "For the coffee."

Nut smiled. The brief one. The real one. The smile that said I understand what you're actually thanking me for and you're welcome for both things.

"Anytime." Nut said.

The taxi. The back seat. The city scrolling past the window—the neon and the traffic and the workers on ladders taking down the last of the Valentine's decorations, the red and pink hearts being removed, the holiday disassembled, the love put away until next year.

Est sat in the dark of the cab and felt his brain react.

He had learned things.

He had learned that Lego was in the Adidas campaign—that Thursday would contain not just Est and Hong but also Lego, that the shoot would be the three of them plus seven others, that the pairing was not a pairing but a group, that the narrative was larger than Prince-and-Rebel.

He had learned that Nut wanted to visit a museum about plastinated bodies. That Hong made deliberate rather than accidental questionable choices. That the building had no elevator and the coffee was professional-grade and the rigging could hold a car and Lego's vices were artisanal.

He had learned that they were kind. That they were real. That they treated him like someone worth knowing rather than someone worth using, like a person rather than a product, like Est rather than the Prince.

But he had learned nothing about the question.

Nothing about who he had spent the night with. Nothing about the unfinished tattoo or the careful hands or the voice that had asked is everything alright? before continuing.

Nothing.

The car stopped at a red light. The driver's radio played something soft—Thai pop, the melody familiar even though Est didn't know the song, the sound of the city's soundtrack, the music that played in taxis and cafés and malls, the ambient noise of Bangkok's collective listening.

Est pulled out his phone.

The message thread with Hong was there. He typed.

Est: Home safe.

The reply came in seconds.

Hong: Good. Same time next week?

Est: What's next week?

Hong: Nothing. That's the point. Just coffee. No agenda.

Est looked at the message.

Nothing.

Just coffee and a rooftop and the company of people who didn't need him to be the Prince or the Darling or the face that sold things or the jaw that the internet analyzed or the empty robot that the comments described.

Just—people. In a room. Being people.

Est: Okay.

He put the phone down.

He looked out the window at the city—the neon, the traffic, the workers on ladders taking down the Valentine's hearts, the world moving, the machinery continuing, the twelve million lives happening simultaneously and independently and together.

He had not found the boy today.

But.

He had found the afternoon.